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GOP bandwagon credited with boosting Jepsen chances in Iowa election

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DES MOINES, Iowa — The political prospects of Senator Roger W. Jepsen, once clouded by the revelation of his membership in a sex club and several other problems, have taken a turn for the better as he clings to President Reagan's coat-tails.

By riding the conservative tide and labeling his Democratic opponent, Representative Thomas R. Harkin, not just a "liberal" but also an "activist," Mr. Jepsen has turned projected defeat into possible victory in this rural state.

The respected Iowa Poll, published recently in *The Des Moines Register*, gives Mr. Jepsen a 9-percentage-point advantage over Mr. Harkin, a 10-year veteran of the House. Earlier this year the poll gave Mr. Harkin a 17-point advantage.

Mr. Harkin said his own polls, while they put him behind, show the margin to be narrower.

"It's due more than anything else to this whole Reagan-Mondale phenomenon," he said. According to Mr. Harkin, Walter F. Mondale has "totally gone through the bottom in Iowa," and that has cost the congressman the support of many moderate Republicans and independents.

In 1980 the state of 2.9 million people voted 51 percent for Mr. Reagan, 39 percent for Jimmy Carter and 9 percent for the independent, John B. Anderson.

The recent reversal in this year's Iowa race means that one of the seats Democrats were most hopeful of gaining in the Senate this year could remain in the GOP camp.

Said the Republican state chairman, Rolf Craft, "It may be coat-tails if you will" — the most recent Iowa Poll gave Mr. Reagan a lead of 23 percentage points in the state — "but the presidential race has clearly defined the difference between the Republican and Democratic parties in a way that has not been done before."

The Democrats' hopes of unseating Mr. Jepsen initially bordered on confidence because of a series of setbacks that plagued the first-term Republican. They included:

□ Funneling funds from the Joint Economic Committee, which he chairs, to the payroll of his own Senate staff to the tune of \$250,000 a year.

□ Claiming congressional immunity from a \$35 traffic ticket when he was stopped for driving alone down the commuter lane of a northern Virginia highway reserved for car pools.

□ His reversal, hours before the Senate vote in 1981, of his opposition to supplying AWACS surveillance planes to Saudi Arabia. Mr. Jepsen said he reached his decision to support the sale after praying and being shown secret intelligence information. The incident became notorious after a White House lobbyist told a reporter that Mr. Jepsen had come to support the bill because "we just beat his brains out. That's all."

□ The revelation earlier this year that in 1977 Mr. Jepsen joined a health club, Leisure Spa Limited, which offered its members nude encounters. Mr. Jepsen, who subsequently became a born-again Christian, initially said he had not known the nature of the club when he joined it, although the membership form he signed explicitly offered "nude modeling, nude encounters and nude rap sessions ... [with] many options available that members may wish to do."

Mr. Jepsen, 55, a resident of Davenport, later said he had joined the club in a moment of "weakness" and "stupidity" and left after discovering its true nature.

Gleeful Democrats started wearing buttons saying, "Roger Jepsen — Porn Again."

Faced with the sex-club revelation, an unfazed Mr. Jepsen blamed his opponent for leaking a photocopy of his membership form to WHO radio station here — a charge Harkin aides vehemently deny — and toured the state with his wife and other relatives seeking voters' support.

He published an open letter complaining of "character assassination" and proclaiming the "good news" of his rebirth as a Christian.

Ironically, according to Mr. Craft, Mr. Jepsen gained slightly in polls in the wake of the scandal.

The apparent explanation: Voters seemed to think it was unfair to recall an error committed years earlier when he was not in public office, and seemed to accept his contrition.

Mr. Harkin has made no mention of the issue during the campaign.

"That was an embarrassment to most Iowans," said John Frew, the Harkin campaign manager. "We are not here to highlight embarrassment. We are here to expose his [Jepsen's] voting record, to talk about the kind of things a senator ought to be doing."

Mr. Jepsen has painted Mr. Harkin, a 44-year-old Ames resident, as a liberal, a Democratic big spender, a man who talks one way in Iowa but votes another way in Washington.

"The challenge to us has been to get [Mr. Harkin's voting record] correctly documented before the people of Iowa," Mr. Jepsen said. "Once that was done, the people of Iowa have perceived the choice is very clear. My record is one of representing the values and concerns of Iowans. My opponent's record is one of representing active, very liberal political ideas."

Mr. Harkin, in turn, accuses Mr. Jepsen of being "out of step" with Iowans in his opposition to a nuclear freeze and his support for the MX missile and U.S. covert operations in Nicaragua.

"I would say the core issues are the economy in Iowa and the farm economy," Mr. Harkin said. "The farm economy is in dire straits, and with our farm economy goes the rest of the economy."

His campaign urges Iowans to vote for "a senator Iowa can be proud of." The slogan is an oblique reminder of what Mr. Frew calls "the shenanigans" of Senator Jepsen. It was adopted before the sex-club issue surfaced.